

Reflections on the Psalms: Session 4

Jesus in the Psalms

In our first session on the Psalms I said that we might be shocked if we approached the Psalms expecting them all to be about being kind and generous, full of hope and faith, as many Psalms, in fact, express the opposite. But I emphasised that we have to understand what the Psalms are; we need to remember that they are not God's messages to us about how we *should* behave as human beings, but prayers from the people of Israel (people like us) offered to God, expressing how we actually *are*. Therefore they include our grief, anger, bitterness, depression, grumbling, even hatred, as well as our trust and faith. The Psalms express the extremes of human experience, thought and emotion – from the exuberant shout of praise to the agonised cry from the depths.

We looked at that agonised cry from the depths last week, and it was difficult even to think about it and talk about it, never mind experience it. (I apologise that we've not really looked at any Psalms expressing jubilant praise over these weeks, but it is Lent after all, and also a time of corporate anxiety and suffering, so perhaps Psalms of lament and questioning express more accurately the reality of many people's experience at the moment.)

But given that the Psalms are prayers from people like us *to* God, rather than direct messages *from* God about how we should behave, does that mean we don't find God's word to us in the Psalms? Well, of course we do. The Psalms record the complex relationship between God and his people, and alongside the cries of bitterness, anger and desperation, there are reflections on the goodness, faithfulness and nearness of God to us; words which express his strength, guidance and love, which can be a great comfort to us today just as they have been to many over the centuries.

In our first session, I quoted Calvin, who said: 'There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror', and St Athanasius, who said: 'in the Psalms... you learn about yourself'. But alongside coming face to face with ourselves in the Psalms, we also meet with God, sometimes perhaps in surprising ways.

Jurgen Moltmann, an eminent 20C theologian, has spoken of his experience as a British prisoner of war immediately after the Second World War:

'The experience of misery and forsakenness and daily humiliation gradually built up into an experience of God. It was the experience of God's presence in the dark night of the soul: "If I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there." A well-meaning army chaplain [almost certainly a member of the Church of England!] had given me a New Testament. I thought it was out of place. I would rather have had something to eat. But then I became fascinated by the Psalms (which were printed in an appendix)...These psalms (of lament) gave me the words for my own suffering. They also opened my eyes to the God who is with those "that are of a broken heart".'

Yes, we can meet with God in the Psalms, not only in the Psalms of praise, trust and peace, but *even* in' the Psalms of lament, yearning and suffering. Perhaps Moltmann's testimony above has something to say to us at this time of fear and suffering.

We meet with God in the Psalms; we also meet with *Jesus* in the Psalms. We read the Psalms as Christians, and that will affect our understanding and interpretation of them. The early teachers of the faith, the Church Fathers, taught that praying the Psalms involved, again and again, an encounter with the person of Jesus. The Church Fathers often referred to the story of the two disciples meeting the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus. You'll remember that as they walk, downcast and grieving, Jesus, as an unknown stranger, comes walking alongside them. After listening to them tell of their lost hope, their sadness and confusion, he expounds the scriptures to

them, and through this and through the breaking of the bread they finally recognise him. Later, Jesus tells his disciples that ‘everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’

So how do we encounter Jesus in the Psalms?

Firstly, the words of many of the Psalms, though speaking of the experience of David or other members of the people of Israel, long before the time of Jesus, also find their fulfilment in the experience of Jesus himself. Some of the desperate prayers for help, seeking God in agonised suffering even when he seems not to answer, can be seen in a spiritual sense as the words of Jesus himself.

I think especially of Psalm 22.

Read Psalm 22.

Part of this Psalm is often read on Good Friday, and very appropriately so, as many of the phrases in it are picked up in the gospel accounts (especially Matthew and Mark) of Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. The Psalm begins with the great cry of desolation: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (v1) which Jesus prays himself from the cross. But many other words in the Psalms also resonate with the gospel accounts: ‘All who see me mock at me.’ (v7), ‘I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint’ (v14), ‘my hands and my feet have shrivelled.; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves and for my clothing they cast lots.’ (v16b-18).

This Psalm can help us imagine Jesus’ suffering on the cross more vividly. This is not to say that the original Psalmist had the crucifixion of Jesus in mind when he penned these verses! But whatever its original historical context, the Church Fathers and many since then have, when praying this Psalm, understood themselves to be praying with Jesus in his agony, rather than with David or some other Israelite in his trials.

Of course, Psalm 22 moves on from the cries of agony and abandonment at the beginning to praise and worship at the end as the Psalmist rejoices in his deliverance; so the Psalm can help us also look ahead from the cross to the resurrection.

Psalm 22 is not the only Psalm in which we can hear the voice of Jesus crying out to God in the midst of suffering; there are many such Psalms: ‘But I am poor and needy, hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay! (Psalm 70 v5-6); ‘even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread has turned against me (Psalm 41 v9); ‘vindicate me, O Lord my God, according to your righteousness, and do not let them rejoice over me.’ (Psalm 35 v24). As we pray these Psalms for ourselves and others, we can also know that Jesus prays those agonised cries for help with us, and indeed we can use the words of these Psalms to enter more fully into Jesus’ experience of betrayal, suffering and death. We can encounter Jesus as he prays *with us* in the Psalms, and we can pray *with him*, as we reflect on his suffering and death on the cross.

But there is another way in which we can meet with Jesus in the Psalms; not just as prayers *of* Jesus to God his Father, as in the prayer which opens Psalm 22: ‘my God, my God, why have you forgotten me?’ and others I’ve just mentioned, but also as prayers *to* Jesus. In the Psalms, Jesus is not only alongside us, our partner in prayer, in joy and in suffering, but he is *also* the answer to our prayers too.

Think of Psalm 23. 'The Lord is my shepherd' it begins. The image of 'shepherd' is used often in the Old Testament as an image for God. It is also taken up by Jesus in John's gospel: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.' When we pray through Psalm 23, we are not just encountering God, but also meeting with Jesus, the 'good shepherd' too.

I also think of Psalm 54 v1: 'Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might.' What is the 'name' of God which gives power and saves? Peter and Paul, when healing the lame man in Acts chapter 4, declare it is the name of Jesus: 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'. (Acts 4 v12). Then again, Psalm 80 v7 speaks of the 'face of God': 'restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we shall be saved.' This idea is taken up in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians when he says 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God is found in the face of Jesus Christ.'

As we pray the Psalms, we pray both *with* Jesus, as he shares our human experience with us; and we pray *to* Jesus, as he embodies the 'name', the 'face', the 'glory' of God himself. So the Psalms don't only help us express our own thoughts and feelings to God, providing a prayer for all seasons of human life and experience; they are also means through which we encounter God and the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus.

Whether we pray the Psalms *with* Christ or *to* Christ, 'the Psalms are given to us to this end that we may learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ.' (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*)

Jesus says to his disciples at the end of Luke's gospel: 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' As we approach Holy Week and Easter may we read the Psalms with expectation that we will meet the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus there.

Session 4: Jesus in the Psalms

Suggestions for Reflection

Meditating on Psalm 22: *Lectio Divina*

- Be still and relax in God's presence.
- **Reading:** Read the passage through slowly, noticing any words or phrases which strike you.
- **Meditation:** Ponder these words and phrases, letting them sink deep into your heart and mind. Be aware of the feelings or thoughts which emerge...of thankfulness, peace, questioning, disbelief, confusion or whatever...
- **Prayer:** Turn these thoughts and feelings on these phrases of scripture into a prayer to God; simply tell him how you are feeling and what you are thinking. If your mind wanders far away - thinking about other things, offer these fragmented thoughts to God too, then gently bring your mind and heart back into focus by repeating one of the phrases in the passage.
- **Contemplation:** After you have responded to the passage in prayer, simply be still again in God's loving presence. This is the heart of all prayer.

Further Questions to Ponder

1. Read Psalm 22 v1-21 and then read Mark 15 v21-39. Can the words of Psalm 22 help you enter into the scene of the crucifixion and the experience of Jesus more deeply?
2. Do you find it more helpful to think of Jesus as the one praying *with* you as you pray the Psalms for yourself and others; or to think of Jesus as the one you are praying *to*, and why? Can you learn something from that which you find more difficult?
3. How might you use the Psalms in your daily life to deepen your prayer, nourish your faith and encounter Jesus, especially during this current crisis? A Christian doctor, Dr Lisa Gilbert, writing about the coronavirus crisis and practical and spiritual resources to help us urges us repeatedly: 'when things are hard we can draw on the Psalms.'

'Take, for example, the Psalms: how are we to read them? As works by inspired, largely unknown poets, living at various moments in the history of Israel? As a collection of songs, composed (largely) by King David? As a hymn book of the Second Temple? As a psalter of the Christian church? But I would rather say: all of these, in this way making our use of the Psalms something through which we *join our prayer with Christ*, or use these as *ways of praying to Christ* (the two predominant Christian ways of understanding the Psalms), but also doing this in solidarity with the whole chosen people of God down the ages, all of whom have, in the Spirit, taken these hymns or poems on their lips.'

(Andrew Louth. My italics)